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## The Politics of Consumption: From Trimalchio and Gatsby to Trump and Beyond

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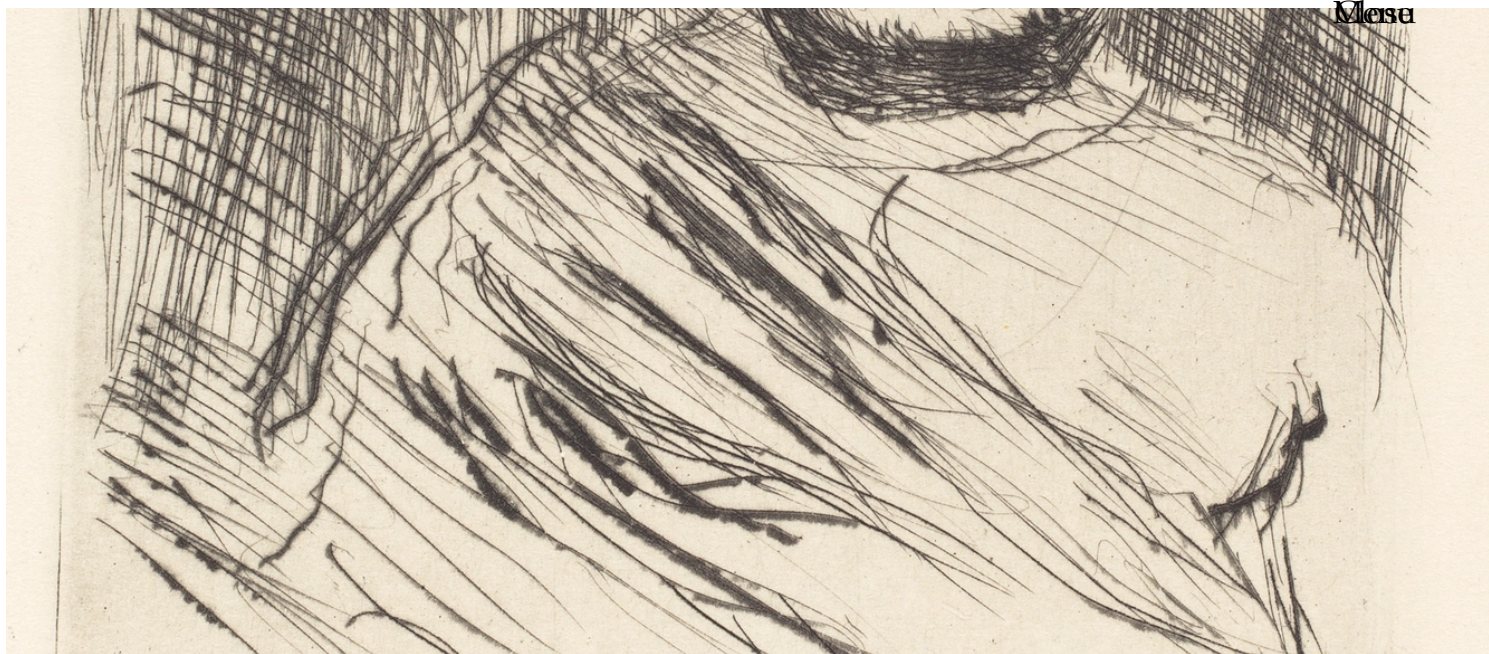
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# The Politics of Consumption: From Trimalchio and Gatsby to Trump and Beyond



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by Jason Schlude[1]

We live in an age of unconventionality and instability, dominated by President Trump. News cycles exhaust us as our eyes flit from one burning meteor to the next. We lose our bearings. In such times we look for patterns in the chaos reminiscent of past experience and hope ancient constellations may bring us safely home.

Enter Trimalchio—at center stage. Trimalchio was a slave freed and made heir to his former Roman master's vast fortunes. We encounter him in the early novel of the *Satyricon* by Latin author Petronius.[2] Set against southern Italy in the first century CE, Trimalchio is larger than life. When encountered by Encolpius, who narrates the *Satyricon*, Trimalchio is a bald, corpulent man nearing his golden years, playing ball games with pretty boys in public, pausing only to expose himself, unselfconsciously, to use his silver chamber pot.





The Banquet of Trimalchio. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.  
(<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.74741.html>).

This is how Trimalchio rolls—as the object of attention. He reclines at the middle of a drunken dinner party in his sprawling villa, inviting fellow Romans like Encolpius to witness his prosperity, power, and popularity. He hangs pictures of himself (actually fresco) in his own home, documenting his rise in status and wealth. He has more properties across Italy than he has seen and more slaves manning them than have seen him. He orchestrates an army of servants as they serve up course after course of food and entertainment: honeyed dormice, one-hundred-year-old fine wine, a roast boar chock-full of live thrushes, acrobats, a statue of the god Priapus with a sling of fruit hanging from his erect phallus (hence the modern warning of “Priapism” on certain medications).

He also orders about and threatens the vulnerable. To slaves he issues warnings (“whatever slave goes outside unordered by the master will receive 100 lashes”) or commands (“Quickly kill yourself; you’re worthless!”). He flaunts his command of history, getting it all wrong, while onlookers pretend otherwise; the Greeks besieged Troy (not Hannibal), Medea killed her sons (not childless Cassandra), and Odysseus and his comrades hid in the Trojan horse (not Niobe). He is unpredictable, playing tricks, keeping his audience on seat’s edge. The fruit guarded by Priapus spits a sticky saffron liquid upon the touch of a finger. Trimalchio has the ceiling panels swing open, allowing party favors to descend upon surprised diners. He makes sexual advances on a slave boy during dinner, and when his wife Fortunata calls him a “dog,” he crushes a cup into her face—all before the eyes of adoring clients.

From rags to riches, Trimalchio suffers from an inferiority complex. He consumes the attention of everyone in his orbit with the gravity of his self-importance. Hence, he can brook no public insult. And near party’s end he indulges in an activity sure to bring unrestrained praise: one’s funeral. He reads out his will, detailing his generosity to all (he will set his slaves free, for example), accompanied by the groans of his household. He gives instructions to his friend for an immense tomb, to be guarded so that the intestinally desperate cannot use it as a latrine. He calls for the following self-description in his funerary inscription: *pius, fortis, fidelis, ex parvo crevit*, “a man of duty, bravery, fidelity, from a small start he made it big.”

The line betrays the purpose of the character Trimalchio for his creator, the author Petronius. Trimalchio is a socio-economic climber in Roman society, who started from the bottom (a slave) and made it to the top (an extravagantly wealthy slaveowner). This much is true in the story. But the short list of virtues here would not be our first thoughts of Trimalchio. The word *pius* strikes us as ill-fitting; it denotes duty to gods, family, and state in the most traditional way. Trimalchio is anything but traditional. He is also far from the reality of most freedmen (slaves made free) in Roman society. He is an exaggerated, satirical figure, blown up to an immense proportion to mock those who reach for higher society.

President Trump is Trimalchio in many ways. Not in the modest beginnings he imagined for himself. He is not *nouveau riche*. But he is an invader in the world of established American politics. He is *nouveau politique*. And he is real.

**Trimalchio suffers from an inferiority complex. He consumes the attention of everyone in his orbit with the gravity of his self-importance. Hence, he can brook no public insult.**

In his own brash fashion, Trump consumes attention and power as he leaves tradition behind. Unlike the majority of his predecessors, this president often avoids polished communications with measured tone, consistency in policy, and standard grammar. The tweets come fast, hot, and at times hard to follow. These unpredictable salvos have everyone waiting for the next tweet, much like the diners hanging on Trimalchio’s every word. He likes to be at the center of things, to go head-to-head with political strongmen, even commemorating contests on coinage, such as Trump’s literal faceoff with “Supreme Leader” Kim on a “Peace Talks” issue (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44217116>).



(released, in fact, before the summit). He, too, relishes surprises, but on a grand political stage. He breaks with tradition to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. He announces swift troop withdrawals from Syria—only to change course shortly thereafter—and then threatens to bomb Bashar al-Assad (and does). He backs out of the Iran nuclear deal. His reflections on gun violence sometimes shock, no matter one's persuasion on the issue.



Coin commemorating Donald Trump's peace talks with Kim Jong-Un. Courtesy of *The New York Times*. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/world/asia/coins-trump-kim-jong-un.html>).

His falsehoods also draw attention, but the large number defies easy analysis. According to Washington Post reporters Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2018/06/01/president-trump-has-made-3251-false-or-misleading-claims-in-497-days/?utm\\_term=.75830b0b0d15](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2018/06/01/president-trump-has-made-3251-false-or-misleading-claims-in-497-days/?utm_term=.75830b0b0d15)), Trump has made over 3,000 “false or misleading claims” as of June 1, 2018. The best explanation for some is ignorance, such as his claim that Rep. John Lewis (D.-Ga.), a civil rights hero of Bloody Sunday fame, was “All talk, talk, talk—no action or results” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/14/us/politics/john-lewis-donald-trump.html>).” Others may be due to different reasons, such as the squall of inconsistencies in the Stormy Daniels case (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-acknowledges-payment-to-porn-star-stormy-daniels-1525347160>). We also have seen how he proclaimed love for DACA recipients, then terminated their program. At least this portion of our society's most vulnerable members are not his priority. The reality is entirely opposite; while Trump's DACA debacle remains unresolved, the President and his Attorney General and Homeland Security Secretary aggressively pursue undocumented immigrants—with immoral and heart-wrenching consequences. Border Patrol agents have separated thousands of children from their parents (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/15/us/politics/trump-immigration-separation-border.html>), a signal that our country will no longer accommodate. Yet the callousness should not surprise; the same person claimed stardom gave him license to handle women however he chose (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>). All this shows that Trump values personal power and attention more than tradition, experience, integrity, and

collaboration. With this in mind, we should expect a revolving door of staff offices (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/>). A president focused on consumption and blind to so many other concerns is bound to hire officeholders unfit or incapable under oppressive and unpredictable leadership.

Trump, akin to Trimalchio, no doubt imagines a glorious political end for himself—long down the road, since he is already campaigning for his next election. But will he leave the White House with the accolades and groans due to an effective senior statesman? If Trump insists on playing Trimalchio, consuming all political attention and agency, leaving little room at his table for anyone with an independent mind, and bullying those he feels beneath him, Petronius would hint no. But he chose not to finish his upstart's biography with certainty as he raced along with Encolpius to the next Italian adventure. So we are left wondering.

This is where F. Scott Fitzgerald has an answer. He completes the *Satyricon's* rags-to-riches story in *The Great Gatsby* (his classic critique of 1920s America), which is primarily set in New York City, a storyland of contrasts, illuminating sunshine held aloft, sometimes gliding by choking smoke. Entitled *Trimalchio* at one point in the drafting process, this is the story of Jay Gatsby, an ambitious cog from North Dakota and Minnesota who dreamed of wealth in all its luxurious color—and achieved it. The title that won out, while catchier, obscured the connection, but only slightly, since Fitzgerald labels Gatsby a “Trimalchio” late in the novel.

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Here Encolpius is Nick Carraway, backseat driver in his own life, watching the world of New York blow by in all its glitter and ash. He shares how Gatsby had single-mindedly sought the fortune that could win him Daisy, Nick's cousin, and the object of Gatsby's obsession for five long years. To win her, he buys a mansion across from hers in New York, inviting all the well-heeled to parties at his palace of surprises in the hope that Daisy will find her way there. Gatsby has to speed the process along, but the reconnection happens. The only problem is—drum roll—Daisy is married to an aristocratic jerk: Tom Buchanan. In the end, Gatsby loses out. But don't feel too bad for Jay; in a game of word association, if you say, “Daisy's voice,” he says, “money.” From the moment he met her, he was uncontrolled in his desire for her blue blood and the gorgeous utopia whose vast watershed sustained it, shining rivers of shallow runs fed by deep pockets. For Gatsby, Daisy is the blue river and the flower that crowns its highest bank.

The end, however, is more tragic. Tom, together with Gatsby and Daisy, collaborate to destroy the sad life of a peasant in their midst, Myrtle Wilson, whose mechanic husband seeks out and kills Gatsby. And so the story closes with his funeral—the funeral that Petronius failed to provide in fact, but now is planned and executed by Nick. The picture is not heartwarming or celebratory. It is lonely, attended only by the necessary help, plus a few others, including Nick, a fresh on-and-off-again friend, and Mr. Gatz, Gatsby's father clinging to pride in his son's empty mansion and accomplishment. The final attendee is a nameless man once impressed by the “real” books in Gatsby's library (not “cardboard”), despite the fact that their uncut pages reveal that Gatsby likely never read a one—a real Trimalchio.

Like the *nouveau riche* characters Trimalchio and Gatsby, Trump as a *nouveau politique* likely will see a different end to his political career, however and whenever that will be. One who is self-consumed, feels entitled to take and abuse, and refuses to genuinely share his table with others will likely find himself

alone, largely uncelebrated, and ultimately forgotten, except perhaps as a cautionary tale of disdain and failure.

This end would have historical precedent. A timely example is the Roman emperor Nero—the very emperor under whom Petronius almost certainly wrote and who perhaps instructed the author to remove himself from history's stage by suicide.[3] What do we know about Nero? If asked this question, many would point to his brutal execution of Christians (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Tac.+Ann.+15.44&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078>) (the first imperial persecution of Christian on record, one limited to the city of Rome). Indeed under suspicion for burning much of Rome in 64 CE to make room for a new imperial palace, Nero blamed the Christians instead. As monotheists, they ill fit the mainstream religious scene, which recognized and revered a diversity of Greek, Roman, and eastern gods. As such they were vulnerable—and Nero used it to his advantage. He made them a scapegoat, sought them out, and openly butchered them with wild beasts, crucifixion, and fire. The treatment was so horrifying that it made even the most intolerant sympathetic.[4]



Gold aureus depicting the Emperor Nero. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/246875>).

We will never know whether Nero actually torched much of Rome for this reason. But that the rumor even gained currency in the first place was due to Nero's self-centered consumption of attention and power, often through untraditional means. For example, he loved to publicly perform, whether in chariot-racing, music, theater, or poetry, hoping to delight the eyes and ears of all.[5] This was problematic for multiple reasons, but most importantly because Roman aristocrats held performers to be of servile character and status. In their eyes, such behavior demeaned the whole ruling class. It did not help that Nero also killed or forced the suicides of many independent-minded aristocrats, including his tutor and advisor, the formidable intellectual Seneca ("the Younger") in 65 CE, and even before that in 59 CE Nero's own politically-influential mother, Iulia ("the Younger") Agrippina.[6] In the Roman world, a place where duty to family was paramount, there could be nothing more deviant than matricide.

The consequences of such behavior were destructive. These acts led to a rebellion against Nero. The Roman ruling class could not tolerate this rogue—and the more conservative military was content to take its lead. Nero took his own life in desperation. Galba, a provincial governor and commander in Spain, marched on Rome to take power. Other generals made their own bids. Before this episode in civil conflict ended, Rome saw four separate emperors rule in 69 CE, the so-called "Year of the Four Emperors": Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian.[7] The vast majority of Romans must have thought that civil war was improbable at best, perhaps even impossible, since 68-69 CE was nearly a century after the last civil conflict, which ended in 30 BCE with the defeat of Mark Antony by Octavian, soon to be hailed as "Augustus," the first Roman emperor. History proved them wrong—and Nero was to blame.

What we do not appreciate today is that Nero made one of the greatest diplomatic deals of the first century CE. When Nero took power in 54 CE, Rome was at odds once again with the Arsacid dynasty, rulers of the Parthian empire. The Arsacids began their empire in the mid-third century BCE in the ancient region of Parthia, now located in the modern state of Turkmenistan. They then expanded beyond it, especially to the south and west, evening coming to rule much of the Middle East, sharing the Euphrates river as a border with the Roman empire. Rome and Parthia were competitors, fighting a series of wars over contested territories such as Armenia.[8] At issue in the 50s and early 60s CE was whether the Roman emperor or Arsacid king would select and install the king of Armenia—a public symbol of hegemony. The disagreement led to several military engagements between the states, but diplomacy won the day. In 63 CE Nero managed a compromise with the Arsacid king Vologases I: Vologases could select the candidate, but Nero formally would install him as king. The compromise (Parthians selecting, Romans approving candidates for Armenian kingship) would last for more than 50 years. True to Nero's leadership style, he insisted that the candidate, Tiridates III, travel all the way to Rome, where Tiridates bowed before Nero, and Nero crowned him before the whole city. The emperor's insistence on publicly underscoring his own authority is clear, but the substance of the compromise remained a real accomplishment to be celebrated. It produced decades of peace.

Hardly anyone celebrates this major success of Nero today. The diplomatic deal was only one part of a much larger legacy, dominated by Nero's other, unsavory behaviors. President Trump should beware of this danger. Whatever the current critiques, we all hope that his groundbreaking meeting with Kim will bear fruit. And if it does, then he will deserve some credit. But even this contribution, if it proves significant, can be eclipsed by flashy stunts and harsh exercises of power that will mar any future narrative of this moment.

**One who is self-consumed, feels entitled to take and abuse, and refuses to genuinely share his table with others will likely find himself alone, largely uncelebrated, and ultimately forgotten, except perhaps as a cautionary tale of disdain and failure.**



Yet the lessons of Nero, Trimalchio, and Gatsby extend beyond Trump. Indeed Fitzgerald's brilliance illuminates more than the President's future. When Fitzgerald changed the title to *The Great Gatsby*, he obscured the fact that there is more than one Trimalchio in his literary landscape. Tom, for example, is "a brute of a man, a great big hulking physical specimen of a—" Trimalchio, if we would finish the unfinished line. He is deeply ignorant, reading racist rags like "The Rise of the Coloured Empires" and concluding that white people are at risk of annihilation and "It's all scientific stuff." He insists, too, on being a center of attention, dragging Nick with him to meet his blue collar, social-climbing mistress, Myrtle—and this despite the fact that Nick is cousin to his wife Daisy. Little surprise that he also assaults Myrtle (as does Trimalchio his wife Fortunata), breaking her nose with "his open hand"—the kind of handout Tom apparently prefers for the lowly. And his blind hypocrisy is just as palpable when he confronts Gatsby's intentions with Daisy; poorly playing the committed family man, he ridicules those who would undermine "family life and family institutions," forgetting himself. The echoes of Trimalchio's multiplicity are even heard in Myrtle and Daisy. Myrtle is a pretender to high class like Gatsby (and Trimalchio), but also displays the physicality of Tom (and Trimalchio), being a "thickish figure of a woman ... and fairly stout." While we imagine Daisy as such a flower, tall and slender with a bright face, she is also content to destroy people like Myrtle.

Fitzgerald shows us the arrogance, ignorance, and brutality of Trimalchio belongs not only to pretenders, but also to some of the socio-economically well-established. To continue our analogy, Trump is at risk of *damnatio memoriae*, but the prediction extends to any politician who celebrates a cult of self-interest and turns a blind eye to the needy. One who upholds principles entrenching oligarchy, rather than strengthening democracy, lacks a morality that inspires and is unworthy of endorsement. At any time, but especially in an election year, all politicians should take note—and we should use our right to vote accordingly.

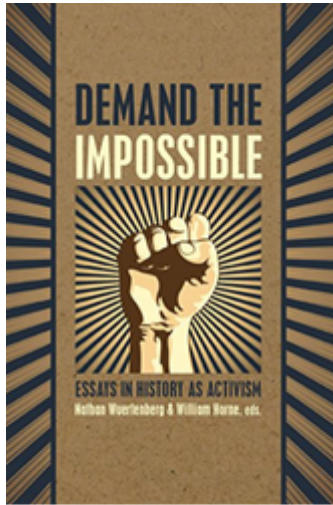
If you think, however, this will right the ship, there is a final, deeper problem. According to Fitzgerald, what direction we should now turn is far from clear. The political establishment by and large has failed many of us. Many who have chased—and even achieved—membership in that order so far have managed to deliver little better. Trump has offered worse. Tempted, however, to think on the good old times, the romantic age of collaborative politics and ethical policy (let's pretend it existed in full-fledged form), we may not find a solution in the past—only the right question to ask. Gatsby could never realize his dream, reach that utopic moment when he first fell in love with Daisy. "He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night." The insight here is terrifying. Fitzgerald thinks of Petronius as much as Gatsby. Writing around the time of Nero amid a recent, but rapidly entrenched empire, as well as the consumption and injustice it produced among its ruling class, Petronius knew the Roman republic was never to return. It may be that our republic, too, at least as we once knew it, can exist only as a memory lodged in the wrinkles of the mind, unfolded and released with painful nostalgia. As we close our eyes and embrace a one-time love, time moves fast, and the smoke and clouds they feed race to steal the night sky. Starless, where will we go next?[9]



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Jewish Thought, and he is Co-Editor of *Arsacids, Romans, and Local Elites: Cross-Cultural Interactions of the Parthian Empire* (Oxbow Books, 2017). He can be contacted at [jschlude@csbsju.edu](mailto:jschlude@csbsju.edu) (<mailto:jschlude@csbsju.edu>).

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([https://www.amazon.com/Demand-Impossible-Essays-History-Activism-ebook/dp/B079BHSPRW/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1517334453&sr=8-1&keywords=demand+the+impossible?](https://www.amazon.com/Demand-Impossible-Essays-History-Activism-ebook/dp/B079BHSPRW/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1517334453&sr=8-1&keywords=demand+the+impossible?)

[encoding=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&linkCode=ur2&tag=storypodca-20&linkId=2P4S6EY6B462X4AR](https://www.amazon.com/Demand-Impossible-Essays-History-Activism-ebook/dp/B079BHSPRW/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1517334453&sr=8-1&keywords=demand+the+impossible?encoding=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&linkCode=ur2&tag=storypodca-20&linkId=2P4S6EY6B462X4AR)).

Our collected volume of essays, *Demand the Impossible: Essays in History As Activism*, is now available on Amazon! Based on research first featured on The Activist History Review, the twelve essays in this volume examine the role of history in shaping ongoing debates over monuments, racism, clean energy, health care, poverty, and the Democratic Party. Together they show the ways that the issues of today are historical expressions of power that continue to shape the present. Also, be sure to review our book on [Goodreads](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/38124557-demand-the-impossible?ac=1&from_search=true) ([https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/38124557-demand-the-impossible?ac=1&from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/38124557-demand-the-impossible?ac=1&from_search=true)) and join our [Goodreads group](https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/443922-the-activist-history-review) (<https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/443922-the-activist-history-review>) to receive notifications about upcoming promotions and book discussions for *Demand the Impossible*!

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## Notes

[1] With Erin Baumer, Preston Blaine, Olivia Busch, Samuel Butterfass, Marcos Castillo, Maren Curley, Abigail Gonzalez, Aimee Hanson, and Tessa Pichotta, Latin students and Classics majors at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. The article was informed by our discussion of the literature

of Petronius and Fitzgerald, addressed below. They bear no responsibility for the modern political analysis or potential shortcomings.

[2] The title calls to mind the mythical satyrs, half-man, half-animal, half-drunk and out for amorous adventures, hinting at the wild story ahead. For a recent and superb introduction to the world of Petronius, especially for those with an interest in the original Latin text, see Beth Severy-Hoven, *The Satyricon of Petronius* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014). The best English translation is Sarah Ruden, *Petronius: Satyricon* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000), which also provides helpful commentary and discussion. For the following tale of Trimalchio, see sections 26-78 of the *Satyricon*.

[3] The exact identity of Petronius remains an open question, but most accept that Petronius worked in the time of Nero and many that he was one of the emperor's favorites before his forced suicide. See Severy-Hoven 9-11; Ruden 129-132. For another prominent, ancient statesman who experienced a fall from grace, see Alex Burns, "Trump as Alcibiades: Lessons in Demagoguery from Greek History," *The Activist History Review*, April 7, 2017, <https://activisthistory.com/2017/04/07/trump-as-alcibiades-lessons-in-demagoguery-from-greek-history/> (<https://activisthistory.com/2017/04/07/trump-as-alcibiades-lessons-in-demagoguery-from-greek-history/>).

[4] The most detailed account of the fire comes from the Roman statesman and historian Tacitus, no fan of Nero (or any other emperor). See Tacitus, *Annales* 15.38-41. Cf. the imperial librarian and biographer Suetonius, *Nero* 38. For Nero's persecution of Christians: Tacitus, *Annales* 15.44.

[5] Tacitus, *Annales* 14.14-16, 15.33-34, 15.44, 16.4-5; Suetonius, *Nero* 11-12, 20-25.

[6] For Seneca: Tacitus, *Annales* 15. 60-64. For Agrippina: Tacitus, *Annales* 13.18-21, 14.1-13; Suetonius, *Nero* 34. For other such acts: e.g. Tacitus, *Annales* 15.35, 15.55-71, 16.9-11, 16.14-35; Suetonius, *Nero* 33-37.

[7] Suetonius, *Nero* 40-50; *Galba*; *Otho*; *Vitellius*; *Vespasian*. See also Tacitus, whose earlier work, the *Histories*, details the events of this civil war in its surviving portions.

[8] It should be noted, however, that modern scholars have overemphasized the conflict between Rome and Parthia at times. These states also enjoyed positive moments of collaboration and lengthy periods of peace. The classic treatment of the events remains N. C. Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938). More recent and accessible is R. M. Sheldon, *Rome's Wars in Parthia* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010). An abbreviated review will be found in J. M. Schlude, "Parthian-Roman Wars," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, forthcoming. The problem of how we explain such opposed tendencies in this relationship will be the subject of my research at the Getty Research Institute in Spring 2019.

[9] I wish to thank my colleagues Martin Connell, Claire Haeg, Matt Lindstrom, Jim Read, Scott Richardson, Benjamin Rubin, and Christina Tourino for their thoughtful feedback on earlier versions of this piece.

**TAGS • CLASSICAL HISTORY • CLASSICS • DONALD TRUMP • F. SCOTT FITZGERALD • JUNE 2018 • NERO • PETRONIUS • THE GREAT GATSBY • TRIMALCHIO**